informed of Government's policies for improvement of infrastructure in India; simplification of rules and regulations; steps towards meeting obligations under Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement of the World Trade Organisation; a transparent and efficient regulatory regime in different fields; and taxation incentives for foreign investments.

Facilities to tobacco growers

1777. SHRI V. HANUMANTHA RAO: Will the Minister of COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government are providing special port facilities for the export of Virginia Tobacco;

(b) whether it is a fact that tobacco is the traditional export of lakhs of farmers;

(c) the special benefits Government propose to give to the farmers who depend on tobacco exports;

(d) whether any transport subsidy would be given for their exports; and

(e) if so, the details thereof?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY (SHRI E.V.K.S. ELANGOVAN): (a) No, Sir.

(b) Over 50 per cent of the Flue Cured Virginia (FCV) tobacco produced in the country is exported.

(c) The Government does not propose to extend any special benefit to FCV tobacco growers.

(d) No, Sir.

(e) Does not arise.

Duty on import of agricultural items

1778. SHRI T.T.V. DHINAKARAN: Will the Minister of COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY be pleased to state:

(a) the details of the agricultural items, on which import duty has been reduced;

(b) whether this reduction of import duty is extended only to some countries;

(c) if so, the details thereof and the reasons therefor; and

(d) the impact of such imports on domestic market and farmers?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY (SHRI E.V.K.S. ELANGOVAN): (a) to (d) General rates of customs duty on agricultural items have not been reduced in the Budget for the year 2004-05. In fact, import duty on palm oils (other than crude palm oil) has been increased from 70 per cent to 75 per cent.

However, as per commitments under the Early Harvest Scheme (EHS) of the Framework Agreement for Establishing a Free Trade Area between India and Thailand, customs duty on imports of certain agricultural items from Thailand, such as, fresh mangosteens, mangoes, fresh grapes, apples, durians, fresh rambutans, longans, pomegranates, and durum wheat has been reduced with effect from 1st September, 2004 by 50 per cent of the general rate of customs duty applicable on these items as on 1st April, 2004.

In respect of the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement, which was signed on 28th December, 1998, the implementation of preferential margins began in March, 2000. Under this Agreement, all agricultural products originating in Sri Lanka, except tea, which is importable under a Tariff Rate Quota regime, as well as those designated in a negative list of imports, are importable at zero duty with effect from 18th March, 2003.

The Agreement on South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), which was signed by Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka on 6th January, 2004, will come into operation from 1st January, 2006. However under the SAARC Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA) preferential imports into India came into operation as from 1st March, 1997.

India also has bilateral trade treaties with Nepal and Bhutan under which duty free imports are allowed on certain agricultural products on the principle of non-reciprocity from these two countries. India has also granted a margin of preferences of 50 per cent of the general rate of customs duty applicable on a limited number of fresh and dried fruit with effect from 13th May, 2003 to imports originating in Afghanistan under the India-Afghanistan Preferential Trade Agreement.

Under the Global System of Trade Preferences (GSTP) India is granting preferential access to six agricultural products to constituent developing Member countries. Under the Bangkok Agreement preferential access is currently granted to nine agricultural products.

The regional trade arrangements provide for trade defence measures which can be resorted to in case of a surge in imports and injury to the domestic industry and farmers. Moreover, the arrangements also incorporate cooperation among the customs authorities of the Member countries in order to ensure that the qualifying origin criteria are not violated. In specific instances, monitoring mechanisms to prevent circumvention of the qualifying origin criteria have also been established, such as under the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement.

Tea Gardens

1779. SHRI CHITTABRATA MAJUMDAR:
SHRI DIPANKAR MUKHERJEE:

Will the Minister of COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY be pleased to state:

(a) the number of closed/abandoned tea gardens in the country, State-wise;

(b) the action taken by Government for payment of P.F. arrear of the workers in these tea gardens; and

(c) the action taken by Government to ensure 100 per cent sale through auction as recommended by the Committees formed by the State Government of West Bengal and Assam to study the problem in tea industry?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY (SHRI E.V.K.S. ELANGOVAN): (a) As per available information, 34 tea gardens are at present closed/abandoned. State-wise details are as follows:—